

collage. One time the pen pals all wrote cinquains together and shared them.

The pen pal project involved a fair amount of coordination. The elementary school teachers and I had to develop a system for delivering the mail to each other in order to avoid post office delays. We also had to work out details about the get-together. But this project was worthwhile for the enthusiasm it generated about writing. Suave, sophisticated, too-cool-for-words college students would get just as excited as the fourth graders when I walked into the room with a full mailbag. They were always prompt about making their replies — and they never thought of this as writing or work, even though they were thinking as authors.

Classroom Experiences

Because my students were going to be elementary school teachers, I tried to show them ways in which writing happens across the curriculum. With the help of Ohio State University Science Education professor Michael Beeth, I incorporated counter-intuitive events in the context of science for one of my collaborative writing experiences. We threw raw eggs at a bedsheet (four students held the bedsheet upright) after having designed a dozen experiments (one for each egg!) and predicted results in traditional scientific process.

My students loved throwing the eggs. Even though the eggs would not break no matter how hard the students threw them at the bed sheet or how tightly the sheet was held (with the exception of the time they put the sheet right in front of a concrete wall) there were inevitable misses and eggs breaking in the hands of the throwers. In fact, one can assume that this activity will result in broken eggs because the mere existence of raw eggs and students' basic desire for fun necessarily result in figuring out how to break them. The mess added to

sense that they were themselves breaking out of some narrow mold.

We did this activity outside, naturally (and we cleaned up afterwards). When we returned to the classroom, I would ask them to write about this in small groups. One frame I always suggested, which was suggested to me when some students were wishing that a photographer from the school paper had come by during our experiments, was that they write an article or the script for a news report on television about our experiences with the eggs. They could choose any other genre as well.

Some students were so taken with the experiments that they continued to experiment (in a sink, with the leftover eggs) to see under what conditions the eggs would break. One student, who had studied physics, spent the writing time working out the forces. When it came time to share, he came up to the chalkboard and drew the diagrams he had figured out. Many students did the news report, demonstrating a real understanding of that genre through their usage of the correct form and the correct voice. These news reports were satirical and very funny — we heard about eggs being viciously murdered and a whole group of college students being arrested.

Even though I directly asked the students to write about this experience, seemingly casting them back into their previous associations with writing, the experience of being not just allowed but *encouraged* to throw raw eggs at something was so compelling that it made their writing lively. The lively quality of their writing indicated to me that they were seeing writing as a way of preserving or adding to an experience that was powerful and exciting. They had something interesting to write about, something important.

Show the Possibilities

One of the activities I liked to do early

it also showed the range of possibilities for writing. Without warning (so no one would try to influence the results), I would ask students to write down everything they had read in the past twenty-four hours. If they microwaved a frozen dinner and read the instructions for doing that, they were to write it down. If they read street signs while walking to class, they were to write that down. Did they read the cereal box that morning? The shampoo bottle? If they read a newspaper or magazine, I asked them to be specific about which parts they read. I asked them to think through their day chronologically so they could be sure to write everything down. Then they wrote their lists on the chalk board. In a class of thirty to thirty-five people, we would have a huge range of things that had been read, from children's literature (for one of their other classes) to airline tickets, from restaurant menus to books about how to do well on the Graduate Record Exam, from want-ads to electric bills, from compact disk pamphlets to letters from home.

I would have a student record this list from the chalkboard, and I turned it into a handout. I separated out genre and subject matter, and usually had quite a variety for both. When I presented the handout at the next class, I pointed out that human beings had written everything they had read and that these were all possibilities for their own writing. I also gave them my "magic rule for writing," which is: you can write about any subject matter in any genre.

Some interesting writing came from this list (which differed every quarter but was essentially a huge list with lots of possibilities). One student wrote a draft of a short story in which everyday writing such as grocery lists and checkbook registers gave the reader hints about a character. Another student found the notion of highway signs to be interesting; her story featured the thoughts of a character who was driving along the highway reading the signs.

Experimental Writing

Since my own academic specialty is modernism, I liked to bring modernist writing techniques into my classroom. One way to do this is through Dada writing.

The Dadaists were a group of people living mostly in neutral Switzerland during World War I. They were political and artistic dissidents and they developed a lot of linguistic innovations, including poetry to be read

simultaneously in three languages (Zaum poetry). One of the Dada "recipes" for writing poetry is to take a newspaper

article, cut it up into its constituent words and then rearrange the words randomly on a page.

I altered this recipe for my class. On a Dada day, I came into the classroom with a stack of the current day's issue of the university newspaper, several pairs of scissors, and jars of rubber cement. Of course the process of defamiliarization began when I walked into my classroom with such an odd collection of items. I gave the students several options. They could do the traditional Dada-type poem which I explained they could just cut out random words and arrange them on the page without having to cut up a single article, or they could make a collage.

The process of cutting out words and physically arranging them on a page

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powerful one for students. A couple of students said that it was the first time they felt they had control over words because they could move them and change them around physically.

During the process of doing this, I pointed out that every time we write, we are essentially using other people's words. We may not be physically cutting them out of the dictionary, but we are using words that

have been used by others. Dada poetry, then, "counts" as writing, even though they are not physically applying pen to paper but are just cutting

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out words from the oh-so-familiar college newspaper (seen anew itself as a source of new writing). This came as a shock to my students.

Writing Books

In part because my students wanted to become elementary school teachers, I introduced children's books in the patterned language, cumulative language, and alphabet/number book genres. I talked with my students about how teachers use such books to help children learn to read and to give them a chance to approximate reading skills. I brought in a number of each kind of book, shared them, and passed them around the classroom. I felt it was important that they become familiar with these genres, but more than that, I was setting up a context in

which groups of students would write their own books.

This activity became the first collaborative writing experience I did in a school term. I liked to do this one first, because students would be writing whole books, which is an intimidating possibility for unsure writers. Yet, patterned language, cumulative language, and alphabet and number books are fairly easy books to write. You don't have to create narrative, unless you want to. Once you develop a structure, that structure remains the same throughout the book — the structure that generates the whole book. And children's book is usually short in length, so students didn't have to write *War and*

After my presentation of the book, I divided the students into groups and asked them to write and illustrate a book in these genres. I did this in groups for several reasons. One is that with more people involved, more ideas would get on the table, and the group would be more likely to select something that would be interesting. Further, there are a lot of steps to writing a book: developing the text, illustrating it onto the paper, editing and revising, and developing and executing the illustrations. These steps would take less time with several people working together. Finally, by working in groups, even the strongest writers would be part of a successful writing project. Had they done it as individuals, I believe that some of the students would not have completed the books.

This activity was always a success. The books produced in my class included a wide variety: an interactive patterned language book in which the reader was invited to draw the main character doing her various activities, an alphabet book of geography featuring countries from Australia to Zambia, a fish-shaped patterned language book about a fish who was a friend, an alphabet book about what a girl found under her bed, and even a

turned language book about the experience of writing a book in my classroom. We read the books to each other and applauded everyone's efforts. Some students went on to write books by themselves in writing workshop. Students who thought that writing books meant creating a 500-page manuscript over a period of fifteen to twenty years learned that they could, indeed, write books themselves.

Sharing Writing Struggles

It came as a shock to some of my students when I revealed that I got a D in English in 10th grade and that I didn't become a writer until I was in graduate school. One of their assumptions about writing teachers is that they never struggle. Yet every writer I know struggles all the time to get words on the page. We struggle to find what we want to say and when we find that, we struggle with how to say it. We struggle to find where we can say it and who is interested in hearing it. We struggle with the desire to communicate and our fears of not being good enough. Our students need to know that we share every struggle they have.

Likewise, there is a delightful book, a copy of which was on my cart, of rejection letters sent to famous authors. This is reassuring for struggling writers that some of the books that are considered great and wonderful received terrible rejection letters. There are also editions of some great works which show the author's revision process (e.g., an edition of Eliot's typescript for "The Wasteland" with Ezra Pound's suggestions for changes). Students should not wait until they take graduate-level literature classes in order to become aware of authors' revision processes.

Performance

For every project that we did, there was some kind of opportunity for performance at the end, which would bring the project to a close and also give students a chance to communicate to an audience with their

writing. Some of our writing was specially designed to be performed, as in the opera that we wrote collaboratively. In one unit I did with them on ballads. Whether or not we had an audience of people outside the class, we gave the best performance of our musical writing that we could in order to celebrate our work.

There was also an optional performance period at the beginning of each class. I always began class with a poetry reading. We would choose a subject matter and read from poetry books poems about that subject, no matter how tangentially connected. Sometimes we would talk about the poems when the mood struck us. The range of poems we read was great, from those by poets who have made it into the academy to children's poetry, and including poets whose work is not likely to be the subject of academic analysis.

Students were encouraged to read their own works, as well as works that had been published by authors not in the classroom. Sometimes I would ask a student (in private, beforehand) to read something he had written. While we never approached the work of the poets from outside the classroom, when one of the authors in the classroom read a work, we always gave a round of applause. I established this tradition early in the term without saying anything about what I was doing. I simply started the applause at the right moment. But the students quickly caught on. While the poets whose works we read were good and worthwhile, the really special and wonderful thing was a piece from someone who was in our community of writers. This gave an immediate message to the writer that his work was appreciated — and encouraged others to take the risk of sharing, which is what writing is all about.

Life in the Defamiliarized Classroom

Defamiliarization techniques are useful to reluctant writers. They are also

ful for students who love to write. Some of the best and most confident writers in my classroom stretched themselves by trying new genres and new writing techniques as well.

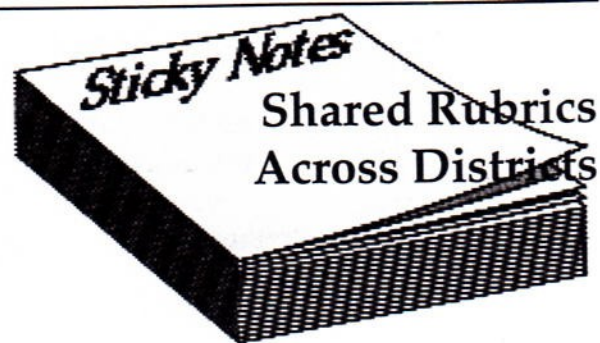
The success of defamiliarization as a teaching technique was brought home to me in a series of cartoons that one of my students wrote about the program the students were in. The cartoon for my class featured me on the first day of class welcoming the students and telling them, "This quarter in writing class we are going to sing operas, throw eggs, do Dada poetry, and have pen pals." In the next panel, a confused student raises his hand and asks, "Yes, but are we going to write?"

Over the course of ten weeks, my students had more than fifty different opportunities for writing. My use of defamiliarization strategies meant that a lot of this writing didn't feel like writing to them. What often happened was that students surprised themselves with what they were able to do. Many of them came into the class reluctant to write; they left the class having discovered something new about themselves and their capabilities.

About the Author: If the text in this journal seems a little . . . defamiliarized . . . on occasion, perhaps it is because Carolyn Cutler is the Production Editor for *OJELA*! She recently completed a Ph.D. in Ohio State's interdisciplinary program; her specialties are modernism and semiotics. She is a freelance writer and editor.

Ohio Literary Map Available

Western Ohio Council of Teachers of English Language Arts (WOCTELA) offers an Ohio literary map and study packet. Indicate elementary, middle school (junior high), or high school study packet. To order, send a check for \$9.50 (payable to WOCTELA) to Marjorie MacKeown, 1444 Pinecrest Drive, Dayton, OH 45414.



Grades 3-12

After students have been writing for about a month and we have shared and discussed good writing, we create a rubric together. We then exchange a set of writing papers with another class in a different school. The papers are marked with a number rather than a name. The papers are made into transparencies (or they could be shared orally or copied in a few group sets) and using the student-created rubric they privately assess each paper. The class discusses the writer's strengths, possible revisions and votes on the score which should be assigned to the paper. The papers are mailed back with our rubric, scores and questions or comments attached on a sticky note. When we receive our papers and their rubric, there are great discussions and revision possibilities. Both rubrics are posted and, over time, revised to become one rubric that both classes use for the next paper trade.

Rosemary Caldwell
Olentangy Elementary
814 Shanahan
Lewis Center, Ohio 43035